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The History of Eggs in Irish Cuisine and Culture

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"Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The argument has gone on for generations, and has never been settled. However, the answer is to be found nesting in the history of food; the egg was first, for the very good reason that the chicken, as the latest addition to the poultry yards of Greece and Italy in the fifth century BC, found geese, ducks and guinea fowl already installed, laying eggs and hatching them"[i]

Introduction

Eggs are one of the most basic and versatile ingredients used throughout the world. Their culinary uses include aeration, emulsifying, enriching, thickening, colouring, binding, and clarifying, not to mention the numerous ways of cooking them on their own. Without eggs, the disciplines of pastry, baking, and sauce cookery would be much less sophisticated. In Ireland today, hens' eggs are the most commonly used but in bygone days the eggs of ducks, geese, quails, plovers, gulls and other wild birds were widely used.

Eggs have played an important role in the Irish culture. For centuries, eggs have done so much more than simply nourish the body; they have soaked up mythological and folk belief, and have been used to celebrate certain religious festivals. They were also an early form of income or means of barter, often contributing far more to the family income than the commonly used term 'pin money' suggests. Initiatives sponsored by successive governments and the rise in the co-operative movement led to improvements in the poultry and egg industry from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s when intensive production in 'battery farms' commenced. Today's hybrid hens can lay up to 330 eggs a year on a daily feed of 120g. Enriched feed produces value added eggs rich in Omega 3 and other nutrients. This paper traces the development of egg production and consumption in Ireland. It includes mythology and folklore, the type of eggs and the breed of hens used, the government schemes which influenced the Irish egg economy, and gives examples of how eggs were consumed in the different strata of Irish society.

History

Ireland's culinary traditions have been evolving since prehistoric times. The story of Irish food is as complex as the many cultural, political and economic forces that have shaped Ireland's existence[ii]. There is a debate about when hens were first introduced to Ireland. Archaeologists tend to agree that they arrived via Roman Britain, where hens' eggs were an everyday part of people's lives and diet[iii]. Popular legend has it, however, that hens were introduced by the Danes[iv]. In early Ireland goose eggs were a very sought after luxury served at banquets on dishes of silver and gold. The beauty of the hen's and the goose's attractive plumage is immortalised in The Book of Kells, an illuminated ninth century manuscript containing the Latin text of the four gospels, housed in Dublin's Trinity College[v]. Cereals and dairy produce were two staples of the early Irish diet. Oats, barley, wheat and rye were used to make coarse flat breads and porridge. Eggs, milk and butter were used to enrich the widely eaten porridge[vi]. A section in the Brehon Laws – the legal system of early medieval Ireland, deals with poultry and lists the fines for trespass of fowl and the measures that should be taken to ensure that poultry did not stray[vii]. 'Dry eggs' formed part of the rigidly sparse diet of the extreme penitent monks in the late eighth century monastic movement 'Céilí Dé' based at the monastery of Tallaght, near Dublin.

Ireland was subject to a forceful wave of conquest and colonisation from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. Prior to this, the diet of Gaelic Ireland was bland, based on 'white meats' – milk and dairy products – coarse cereals and occasional meats – principally pork or bacon. New culinary techniques and recipes were introduced in the twelfth century by the Anglo-Normans, including the built up oven and the use of spices and sweet and sour combinations. By the fourteenth century there was a fusion of Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Norman food patterns. Culinary innovation and change followed the Tudor and Stuart conquests of the 16th and 17th centuries, with the introduction of the pheasant, turkey and most significantly the potato. An Anglo-Irish gentry class emerged with a rich and varied cuisine, influenced by the professional French chefs who had become a fashionable addition to their kitchens[viii]. Diet varied considerably with social status, the basic peasant staples of oats and dairy produce co-existing with the acquired traditions of the gentry. By the nineteenth century the potato had established itself as a staple of one third of the population, an

overdependence which led to the devastation of the Famine in the 1840s when successive harvests failed.

Ireland underwent a period of rapid commercialisation during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Egg consumption increased during this time but were rarely referred to in dietary surveys[ix]. Eggs provided farm families with a domestic economic enterprise directly tied to the marketplace, which required little initial capital[x]. Eggs were not eaten by the poor in the West of Ireland in the 1821-1851 period, but sold to pay the rent or 'put a shoe on our foot or a spade in our hand. We sell them now, we used to eat them'[xi].

Mythology and Folklore

Hens and eggs feature strongly in Irish mythology and folklore. The Middle Irish tale of 'Fled Dúin na nGéd', dating probably from the twelfth century tells of a battle where good, represented by King Domnall mac Aeda, prevails over evil. The king of Ulster, Congal Cláen, attends a feast prepared by Domnall at which goose eggs are served, some of which were stolen from Bishop Erc Sláine and others provided by two monstrous giants. Erc and the giants place a curse on whoever eats the eggs. When the first goose egg, which was served on a silver platter, was placed before Congal, the power of the curse turned the platter to wood and the goose egg into a hen's egg. The men of Ulster took the happenings as a great insult and a ferocious battle was fought. The storyteller concludes 'What is the difference at all between the egg of the red feathered hen and the egg of the white winged goose. Alas for him who destroyed all Erin for dispute over an egg'[xii].

Legend also has it that the pairing of eggs and bacon is of Irish origin. An old Irish peasant woman was frying bacon for her man when a hen roosting on the cross-beams above the open fireplace dropped an egg, hitting the side of the pan and spilling its contents into the sizzling fat. The woman served the egg and bacon to her man who consumed the lot and went forth to the monastery where he laboured, marvelling at the combination. Thus the fame of bacon and eggs entered the monastery walls and spread from monastery to monastery, from country to country, as the dish came to be relished by rich and poor 'all by the grace of God and the irregular proclivities of the lazy old hen'[xiii]. Cohabiting with poultry had its perils. Hens foraged for themselves

during the day and were always housed at night to protect them from predators, often spending the night on ropes hung across the kitchen of a labourer's cottage[xiv]. A Blasket Islander recalls a young chicken dropping out of the roof and into his father's mug of milk during his childhood in the 1870s. Further investigation revealed over ten chickens and a hen nesting in the thatch roof[xv].

Eggs are central to an anecdote collected by folklorists in the four provinces of Ireland concerning the meanness of employers and the cleverness of servants or workers with regard to the food they received. When asked how they would like their egg boiled, the answer was 'along with one or two others'. When asked whether they liked them hard or soft the answer was 'doesn't make one bit of difference, ma'am; if they are too soft, I'll harden them with butter, and if they are too hard I'll soften them with butter'[xvi].

Irish Food Customs

On Shrove Tuesday, a night of feasting took place before the black fast of Lent began. Pancakes were always made that night using up all surplus butter, eggs, milk and cream before Ash Wednesday. It was customary to let the eldest unmarried daughter toss the first pancake. If the pancake fell to the floor she had no hope of marriage during the coming twelve months[xvii]. In medieval times people believed that the barnacle goose did not constitute meat, since it spent most of its time at sea, and therefore their flesh and eggs could be eaten during times of fasting. The week of Good Friday, known as Holy Week, marked the end of the Lenten fast at its most severe. Eggs, which were laid on Good Friday were marked with a cross and kept aside until Easter Sunday when they could be eaten. Eggs hatched on Good Friday were believed to produce healthy birds[xviii]. Eggs were consumed in large amounts for breakfast on Easter Sunday, with men eating an average of six eggs each[xix]. Eggs were dyed by boiling them with herbs, plants and traditional dyestuffs and these coloured eggs were a symbol of luck. Today, chocolate Easter eggs have replaced birds' eggs.

May Day was the time of year that the 'síóga', or fairies were believed to change their residence and their magic was supposedly at its most potent. To counteract fairy magic each family set up a May bush before their door. Eggshells, especially those

that had been dyed for Easter Sunday, were used along with ribbons, bunches of flowers and coloured paper to decorate the May bush[xx].

Role of Eggs in the Irish Economy

The value of eggs in the Irish economy in 2006 is approximately 30 million Euros. Ireland produces in excess of 569 million eggs annually, predominantly for the Irish market[xxi]. The Irish egg business was not always as buoyant. The names of two politicians, Horace Plunkett and James Dillon, stand out in the story of the Irish Egg Industry. In his Land Act of 1891, Arthur Balfour established the Congested Districts Board, of which Plunkett was a member. It encouraged a huge range of cottage industries and employed instructors who taught farming families the skills of poultry and egg production. Many of the small nondescript fowl found in Irish farmyards were inbred for generations and laid small white eggs. Poor stocks and the practice of hoarding eggs prior to sale combined to give Irish eggs a very poor reputation in the lucrative English marketplace. Efforts were made to improve the breeding stocks and the quality of eggs produced. The Congested Districts Board's scheme for improving poultry was calculated to benefit the poorer classes of small occupiers on the western seaboard. The scheme distributed pullets and cockerels and recommended distributing sittings of eggs of the Andalusian and Leghorn varieties[xxii].

Horace Plunkett founded the Irish Co-operative Movement in 1889[xxiii], and also founded The Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) in 1894 to co-ordinate and promote the co-operative movement. In 1895 the weekly *Irish Homestead* was established to publicise the movement and its ideas[xxiv]. The IAOS had 778 affiliated societies[xxv], and employed poultry experts from England and Denmark to educate and advise its members on how to select and pack eggs for the English market. The Recess Committee, also formed by Plunkett to urge the establishment of a Department of Agriculture and Industries, reported in 1896 that the total value of eggs imported into the United Kingdom in 1894 was £3,786,329 – coming mainly from France but also from as far away as Russia. They argued that

> 'there is no reason why every penny of this £3,786,329 might not be earned in Ireland, if the suppliers learn the secret of getting their eggs to market fresh, if they are helped to do so by railway and steamboat facilities and if good breeds of poultry be introduced and proper principles of rearing and keeping inculcated'.

Thom's Directory shows an increase in the number of poultry kept in Ireland in 1891 and values them at £381,309, but they give no figures or value for eggs[xxvi]. The value of the sale of eggs to the County Mayo economy in 1880 was calculated at £42,500[xxvii]. This figure had more than doubled by 1892 according to the Congested Districts Board's baseline reports[xxviii].

Egg production may be viewed as a substitute for the pre-Famine domestic linen manufacture, since it employed the same family members, and like domestic spinning it produced a similar cash income necessary for the maintenance of a small farm economy[xxix]. The production and selling of eggs, principally women's work, contributed up to a quarter of the total family income[xxx]. This is far more substantial than the commonly used term 'pin money' suggests.

Co-operative Poultry Societies

By 1902 there were thirty one special poultry societies with a turnover of £29,914. Some of these societies were absorbed by agricultural co-operatives which increasingly started to sell eggs for their members[xxxi].

> 'The Irish egg', said Plunkett, 'has acted as a depreciated currency. In its too long life it became as dirty as a one pound note, and the process of securing for it its proper place in the English wholesale trade, aroused the wrath of those who profited by its humble place in Irish retail trade'[xxxii].

The co-operatives faced resistance from the established traders. It was the local shopkeeper's system of bartering eggs for groceries that had led to the crisis of dirty, stale, un-graded eggs being refused by the British merchants. A persistent problem facing the early efforts to improve the quality of the Irish egg was that cheap, low grade, foreign eggs were sold in England as 'Irish', whilst the good Irish eggs supplied by Irish co-operatives were passed as English or French. A similar fate befell Irish whiskey in America during Prohibition from which it never fully recovered. In order to overcome the fraud and deep-rooted prejudice against Irish eggs, the IAOS introduced a trademark – a diamond shape with an odd looking shamrock and the letters IAOS. In 1910 this was superseded by the trademark KARKA, a phonetic rendering of the Gaelic word for 'hens'. The co-operative bought eggs by weight rather than by number, and children would often take the day's laying of eggs to the co-op on their way to school, thus ensuring freshness. The IAOS calculated that in

1899 forty hens gave as much profit as one cow, but revised the figure by 1906 to twenty hens.

Many housewives regarded the new system of selling to the co-op rather than bartering with the shopkeeper as an intrusion into their jealously guarded domain. This sentiment impeded the growth of co-ops involvement in the egg trade. By 1914 only twelve strong poultry societies remained, most of which had added grocery supply to their business, as they could not otherwise compete with the 'huxters'.

Government Schemes

Government policy during much of the twentieth century actively promoted domestic egg production until economies of scale led to the intensive production of eggs. The Department of Agriculture established a poultry fattening station in 1905 at Avondale, County Wicklow. A profitable table poultry industry, the forerunner of the modern broiler chicken industry emerged. Chickens were luxury food that enjoyed a steady market demand except during the game season. The Poultry Advisory Service was initiated in 1908 and continued following Irish Independence in 1921 by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction. Instructors travelled the country visiting farms that kept a large number of hens, teaching poultry management skills. The main concentration of the instructors was in the counties of Cavan, Monaghan, Limerick and Cork where the industry was most prevalent[xxxiii]. In 1924 the Agricultural Produce (Eggs) Act laid down definite standards for grading and packing export eggs[xxxiv].

Irish egg exporters enjoyed a boom period during the First World War. In 1930 Ireland exported £3,750,000 worth of eggs, but by 1937 this figure had fallen dramatically to £750,000. Countries such as Denmark and Holland whose production had been affected by the war were pushing Ireland out of the egg market. By 1940 only three specifically poultry co-ops had survived: North Kilkenny, Athlone and Clonbrock & Castlegar[xxxv]. Deputy James Dillon, foresaw the need for action and encouraged the Irish public to engage in extensive egg production. Dillon urged the then Minister for Agriculture, Patrick Hogan, to take measures to stimulate the production of eggs. The 'day old chick scheme' was introduced to produce a better class of fowl for laying eggs, particularly for the British market. Eggs were provided

for hatching, either free or at a reduced rate, and grants were provided for building proper poultry houses. Dillon suggested widening the use of Hover and Putnam lamps, as the average country house had no suitable accommodation for the maintenance of day old chicks. He also suggested that poultry instructors take vigorous measures to familiarise farmers' wives with the use of these lamps. Rural electrification helped the winter production of eggs as lights could be left on to fool the hens into thinking it was still summer.

Production of eggs increased but the advent of the Second World War also increased export demands, which remained long after the war had ended. There was plenty of meat, fish and eggs in neutral Ireland, which was like the land of milk and honey to visitors from war-ravaged Britain. Jimmy Kilbride[xxxvi], a chef in Dublin's Gresham Hotel during the war years, remembers a party of sailors ordering two Porterhouse steaks and six fried eggs each. Johnny Opperman[xxxvii] who was head chef at the City Hotel in Derry in 1939 recalls Donegal women crossing the border with eggs hidden in special pockets under their shawls to sell on the 'black market'. An Egg Agreement with Britain had been secured in January 1947 requiring Ireland to supply a stated quantity of eggs regardless of season. In 1950, a sum of £1,350,000 was made available by the British Ministry of Food to subsidise the price of Irish eggs in an effort to encourage Irish people to go into greater production of eggs to supply the British market. A similar amount of money was put up by the Irish Government but Ireland didn't exploit the export opportunity that existed and the establishment of British Egg Marketing Board (BEMB), which guaranteed a profitable price for all British eggs, put an end to the export market. A thriving egg industry grew in England particularly around Lancashire. The number of laying hens in Northern Ireland rose from 2 million to 9 million in five years. Eggs were now being smuggled across the border from the north to the south[xxxviii]. In 1956 the Co-operative Poultry Products Ltd. was founded by a group in the Cavan/Monaghan area and played an important part in the development of modern intensive poultry keeping which began in the early 1960s.

James Dillon served for almost forty years in and out of Government, sitting as Minister for Agriculture on two occasions. Since the inception of the 'day old chick scheme', young chicks have been known as 'Dillons óga' or 'young Dillons' in the

West Galway Irish speaking 'Gaeltacht' area. The Poultry Advisory Service evolved over the years, but still exists to advise new entrants into the now specialist egg industry. The Irish egg industry suffered from the 1988 salmonella scare in England. Although there was little or no salmonella in Ireland, public confidence was affected by the negative press coverage. The egg industry working with Bord Bia, the Irish food marketing board, and experts from relevant state agencies developed the Egg Quality Assurance Scheme (EQAS) in 2000. Ireland is one of only four European Union countries with an EU approved salmonella plan.

Types of Eggs

Domestic fowl were bred from at least the early Christian era. The following birds are mentioned by name in the Lives of the Saints: blackbird, wren, duck, lark, swan, cuckoo, crane, raven, partridge, kite, hawk, sparrow, eagle and stork[xxxix]. Turkeys were introduced in the wake of the Stuart and Tudor settlements but like the guinea fowl that followed they were more valued for their flesh than their eggs. Little is published about Irish wild egg consumption; most records deal with domesticated birds – hens, ducks and geese[xl]. Wild birds' eggs supplemented the diet in spring and early summer when food was scarce and crops had yet to ripen. Seabirds' eggs were eaten frequently by the Blasket and other west coast islanders, though their consumption often resulted in bad breath[xli]. The eggs of larger fowl were usually roasted whilst those of smaller birds were often sucked out of the shell – a practice which is preserved in the saying 'don't teach your granny how to suck eggs'. Goose eggs were known to be a luxury, hen's eggs were preferred by women and children as sweeter, whereas duck eggs were considered more substantial food for men, and hard boiled, provided a portable lunch whilst at work in the field or cutting turf[xlii].

Since egg production slowed or ceased in winter months, it was customary in Ireland to preserve eggs when they were plentiful. The most common method was to butter the eggs. As soon as the hen laid the egg, the warm egg was rolled between palms that had been smeared in fresh butter. The butter formed an air-tight seal around the egg and kept them fresh through the winter months. Buttered eggs are still sold in Cork's famous English Market. Another method found in an 1851 county Limerick manuscript book preserves eggs in a mixture of water, saltpetre, salt and lime (Sexton 1998:101). Eggs preserved in this way were mostly used for baking[xliii].

Breeds of Hens

Today's laying hens are all hybrids that have been developed by geneticists in a few elite centres around the world for the quality and quantity of their eggs. Commercial laying breeds used in Ireland today include Hy-line, Lohman Brown, I.S.A Brown, Shaver and Babcock[xliv]. Among the earlier breeds were the Leghorn (white, black, and brown), Wyandotte, Sussex, Dorking, and the Old Irish Bare Neck hen – a hardy breed popular on small hill farms introduced from Transylvania in the nineteenth century[xlv]. The ordinary fowl at this time were small and nondescript, mostly comprising of poorly fed mongrel hens which virtually ceased egg production in winter[xlvi]. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there appeared a number of fancy breeds such as the Bantam hens, Peking Ducks and Indian Runner Ducks[xlvii].

A distinctive dual purpose breed – the Hibernia – was established following nine years of intensive work by Isaac Varian of Stillorgan, Co. Dublin[xlviii]. This new breed, exhibited in 1904 at the Royal Dublin Society, was described as 'an excellent layer of large brown eggs and a large shapely fowl which can readily be fattened'[xlix] . One of the most common breeds used to be the Rhode Island Red, which was first introduced to Ireland in 1904. The Rhode Island Red breed was improved in the first two decades of the twentieth century. A dual purpose hen, they are excellent layers of mid brown eggs and are also known to be strong foragers. With dual breeds the male birds were reared as broilers and the females for laying. Co-ops remained active in the broiler industry, but dual purpose breeds declined as the egg industry specialised and specific laying breeds like Warren Studler, Babcock, and Hysex became common[l]. Among today's hybrid layers all male birds are destroyed at hatching, the pullets begin laying eggs at seventeen weeks and continue egg production for around fourteen months[li]. Production has reached nearly 100% with birds producing up to 330 eggs a year on a daily feed of 120g[lii]. They are effectively 'egg machines'.

Intensive Production

Farmers seemingly never realised the monetary value of eggs, dismissing it as women's work, so much so that in the 1960s when production intensified with the modern battery industry, it was businessmen rather than farmers who took the lead. The pioneers were the Phillips family who set up the 'Ballyfree Farm' brand[liii].

Ballyfree were the first to market their eggs to supermarkets and engaged in advertising their brand in the press and on the television. Prior to this, eggs were mostly sold door to door in urban areas. Corby Rock Eggs were one of the early companies that diversified into milling animal feeds. They sold their egg operation in recent years to Greenfield Foods. There has been a growth in recent years in free-range, barn and organic egg production. Clonard Clover Ltd have specialised in free-range eggs for the last ten years. An EU directive has set the year 2012 for the complete phasing out of the battery system. A new 'aviary' system is currently being developed. Profit margins in egg production are very tight, squeezed by the power of the supermarkets. Many producers dream of selling directly to the consumer and a machine for automatic farm-gate sales has been recently invented by an Irishman[liv].

Code	Production	Number of Hens	Dozens of Eggs	Total Eggs	Average Eggs in Dozens	Average Eggs per Bird
0	Organic	15,576	397,335	4,768,020	26	306
1	Free Range	554,421	14,563,530	174,762,360	26	315
2	Barn	53,019	1,329,851	15,958,212	25	301
3	Cage	1,342,118	31,095,906	373,150,872	23	278
Total		**1,965,134**	**47,386,622**	**568,639,464**	**24**	**289**

Figure 1.1 Annual Egg Production for 2003[lv]

Eggs Today

The leading producers of eggs in Ireland, mostly based in County Monaghan, are Greenfield Foods, Annalitten, Mac Fresh Eggs, and the Nest Box Company[lvi]. In 2003 the annual per capita consumption of eggs in Ireland was one hundred and fifty one. Japan (329 eggs) and Mexico (321 eggs) are the world leaders in egg consumption, with India (40 eggs) bottom of the list[lvii]. Figure 1.1 shows the annual egg production for 2003. Free-range hens produce on average the most eggs, but the majority of birds are in cage production. In the past number of years the Irish egg market has seen the introduction of a number of new added value branded egg products. Corby Rock Eggs, have developed two such products; 'Eggcel' and 'Eggsmart'[lviii]. 'Eggcel', is high in Omega 3 and selenium, due to the enriched diet of the laying hens. First introduced in 2000, it now accounts for 14% of the company's business. In 2004 'Eggsmart' was launched, which is high in lecithin and carotene helping to keep the brain active and aid eyesight. Greenfield Foods have also introduced an egg rich in omega 3, called 'O-Megga' free-range eggs.

The Egg in Irish Cookery

Where would the rich Irish home baking tradition be without eggs? Pancakes, Porter cake, Simnel Cake, Carraway seed cake, Plum cake or indeed the [lix]most important of all, Christmas cake would not exist without them. Eggs are most commonly consumed today as part of the Irish breakfast, mostly fried, but also poached or scrambled. Fried egg and bacon are mentioned in 1732 as the favourite food of the Dean of Down[lx]. Soft boiled eggs were either breakfast or supper food, often served with toast or chopped up in a cup for younger children. Boiled eggs were often served with a mixture of mashed potatoes and chopped onion called 'Kala' in West Galway[lxi]. Hard boiled eggs, the ultimate convenience food, became portable lunchtime snacks, and were also served in salads or sandwiches, often mixed with mayonnaise or salad dressing.

Social stratification influenced how the eggs were cooked. The Clonbrock manuscript book from Castlegar, Co. Galway provides evidence that curried eggs were eaten as part of the late nineteenth – early twentieth century upper class diet. Alfred Suzanne, in his 1905 publication '*Egg Cookery*' describes more than two hundred ways of converting eggs into dainty and appetising dishes[lxii].Suzanne, born in Normandy in 1829, was apprenticed in the kitchen of the Earl of Clarendon, then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, before spending four years in the position of head pastry cook at Dublin Castle in the mid-nineteenth century. The Irish twentieth-century culinary repertoire included Coulibiaca, Kedgeree and Haddock Monte Carlo, all of which combine eggs with fish. I heard a Dublin woman recall ordering an omelette in Dublin's Metropole Restaurant in the 1950s because it was the only item of the French menu she understood. The poet Patrick Kavanagh used to eat a boiled egg each morning for breakfast and used the boiling water to shave. He explained his unshaven appearance one day to an enquirer thus: the egg cracked. Ireland in 2006 is a truly multicultural, cosmopolitan society where egg consumption is as likely to be in the form of egg fried rice from a Chinese takeaway or in a goat's cheese and sun dried tomato quiche from Marks & Spencers, as in the form of the traditional boiled egg.

Conclusions

Eggs have long been part of Irish cuisine and culture. Goose eggs were the most highly prized in ancient Ireland. Duck eggs were considered more suitable for men and sea birds' eggs consumed by the west coast islanders reportedly led to bad breath. Different breeds of hens have been introduced over the centuries culminating in today's hybrids. During the Great Famine (1845-47), eggs were not eaten by the poor but sold to pay the rent. Research has shown that egg production, predominantly women's work, generated up to a quarter of the family income in poor farming households. Eggs were a form of cash, as they were bartered with local shopkeepers for items such as tea, bread and sugar. The practice of shopkeepers hoarding eggs prior to exporting them led to Irish eggs gaining a poor reputation in the British market. The work of the Congested Districts Board, the co-operative movement and the Department of Agriculture led to the improvement of breeds and poultry management. Exports were helped by both World Wars, but the egg industry gradually became more and more specialist. It was businessmen, not farmers, who developed modern intensive battery farming in Ireland. Eggs are now moving from a basic food to a functional food with the new omega-3 enriched eggs gaining market share. Ireland is one of only four European Union countries with an EU approved salmonella plan, and the Irish egg business is valued at 30 million Euros annually. There is an old expression used in Dublin when someone is doing well financially 'they must be keeping hens'.

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Notes

[i] Toussaint-Samat 2001. p.355
[ii] Sexton 1998a. p.15
[iii] Wilson 1973. p.139
[iv] Allen 1998. p.31
[v] Mahon 1991. p.114; Sexton 1998. p.52
[vi] Sexton 1998a. p.11
[vii] Mahon 1991. p.116
[viii] Sexton 1998a. p.12
[ix] Clarkson and Crawford 2001. pp.106-7
[x] Jordan 1994, p.143
[xi] Langan-Egan 1986. p.28
[xii] Mahon 1991. p.120; Mac Gearailt 2003. p.398
[xiii] Allen 1998. p.118
[xiv] Ibid p.31
[xv] Ó Crohan 1990. pp.28-9
[xvi] O' Dowd 1991. pp.161-2, 326
[xvii] Mahon, 1991. p.125
[xviii] Ibid p.127
[xix] Ibid p.128
[xx] Ibid p.128
[xxi] Personal Communication with Martin Freeman, Department of Agriculture 29 June 2006.
[xxii] Ní Éineacháin 2000. pp.99,110
[xxiii] King 2003. p.879
[xxiv] King 2003a. p.537
[xxv] Number of affiliated societies in 1904.
[xxvi] Bolger 1977. p. 277
[xxvii] Almquist 1977. p. 258
[xxviii] Jordan 1994. p. 143

[xxix] Almquist 1977. pp. 254-259
[xxx] Quinn 1996. p. 97
[xxxi] Bolger 1977. pp. 278-9
[xxxii] Ibid p. 278
[xxxiii] King 2006.
[xxxiv] Bolger 1977. p. 287
[xxxv] Ibid p. 283
[xxxvi] Interview with Jimmy Kilbride 18th October 2003
[xxxvii] Interview with Johnny Opperman 24th April 2004
[xxxviii] Ennis 2006
[xxxix] Mahon 1991. p.114; Stokes 1995)
[xl] Quinn 1996. p. 96
[xli] Mc Kenna 2003. p. 406
[xlii] Mahon 1991. p. 119
[xliii] Ennis 2006
[xliv] Ibid
[xlv] Interview with Jonathan Bell, retired curator of Ulster Folk and Transport Museum 22 June 2006.
[xlvi] Bolger 1977. p. 279; Ní Éineacháin 2000. p. 99
[xlvii] Bell 2006
[xlviii] Bolger 1977. p. 283
[xlix] *The Irish Homestead*, 17 December 1904
[l] Personal Communication with John Mohan 26 June 2006.
[li] Interview with Nuala King, Poultry Advisor, Teagasc, Athenry Co. Galway 26 June 2006.
[lii] Interview with Arthur Ennis, poultry expert 28 June 2006.
[liii] Ibid
[liv] Ibid
[lv] Department of Agriculture figures
[lvi] Freeman 2006.
[lvii] Poultry International 2005 Volume 1.
[lviii] www.farmersjournal.ie/2004/0515/agribusiness/companycoop
[lix] Wilson 1973. p. 147
[lx] Allen 1998. p. 32
[lxi] A dish often prepared by my father Liam Mac Con Iomaire for the family when my mother was visiting her parents (MMCI).
[lxii] Anon 1896b; Bode 2000. p. 123